

Pastor Bob Fox Personal Notes on Romans 1

1:1—“Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,” Paul identifies himself as the author of this letter, which we suppose to have been written about AD 56, while he was in Corinth. In terms of the Acts account, the writing of this letter probably occurs in Acts 20:2-3. As in most cases Paul uses his Roman name instead of his Hebrew name, “Saul.”

Paul refers to himself here in several ways. First, he calls himself a bond-servant of Christ. He views himself as having been purchased and so owned by Christ, chained to His purposes. This figure is common in Paul’s descriptions of himself. It reveals the depth of his submission to Christ as Lord and the depth of his conviction about how life should be ordered. It is an order of living that is quickly fading from the scene of American Christianity.

Second, Paul says of himself that he is called as an apostle. The word apostle means one sent with a commission. It implies official authority as a representative. The word is used 86 times in the New Testament. 72 of these occurrences are like this, a reference to a specific office. This short phrase, “called as an apostle,” denotes a summons for an official duty, and then a conferring of authority and understanding for carrying out that duty.

Third, Paul says of himself that he is “set apart for the gospel of God.” There are a number of things God could commission one to do. Paul saw his own commission as relating specifically to the Gospel. The term Gospel means good news or a good announcement. But it meant something more specific to Paul. This that he refers to as the gospel becomes the subject of the rest of the letter. The term gospel is used by Paul in various ways in his writings. It can have a narrow meaning, referring specifically to the good news of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-8). It can refer to a broader body of truth that flows out of those central facts that is to shape the Church and individual lives (1 Tim 1:10-11). In this letter Paul will set forth in an orderly and formal way this broader body of truth.

An important thing to recognize here however, is Paul’s statement that he is “set apart for” this message. It is not the more common Greek word that has this meaning from which words like holy, sanctified, and saint are derived. It is a word that means to separate with boundaries. It is the word used of separating the wicked from the righteous in the final judgment (Matt. 13:49; 25:32). Paul viewed his mission as quite focused and even distinct with respect to that of the other apostles (Eph. 3:1-13). He was entrusted not simply with proclaiming the gospel and serving its purpose, but with being somewhat of a custodian of the truth itself. His writings reflect a desire to articulate it accurately and to guard its content carefully. This letter makes a significant contribution to that effort of Paul’s in terms of preserving the accuracy of the gospel message over the centuries.

Next Paul will move from this brief statement about himself to an important statement about this gospel.

1:2—“which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures.” This is an important statement about the gospel of God. It speaks of a technicality that is important if one desires to develop an understanding of the Bible as a book. We understand God’s gospel precisely when we understand that it is fully expressed in its central figure, Jesus Christ. Therefore the gospel is more fully known and experienced as Christ is more fully known and experienced. This in turn means that our experience of the gospel is fuller as those who have lived after Christ, than was that of those who lived before Christ. Now it is possible to take such distinctions too far. It is also possible not to make them because of an over-commitment to continuity. It is easy to think that the understanding of Christ on the part of Old Testament saints was greater than it was.

It is clear from these words of Paul that the Old Testament revealed the gospel of God. The prophets spoke beforehand of it. It is also clear from Paul’s words that this disclosure came in the form of promises. God’s gospel then is rightly understood when it is seen as a series of promises with respect to man. It is good news because it is an announcement of a series of actions God intends to take in humankind’s behalf. The detail of that action become clearer as time passed. There was progress in revelation in terms of understanding God’s intended action. But the detail of that action was not experienced until Christ. It was everywhere in the words and symbols of the Old Testament. But it could not happen until Christ did His work in behalf of humanity. The full impact of that work can be more fully understood as we revisit the words and symbols used by those Old Testament prophets, in light of New Testament revelation. The words of Paul in particular were ordained by God to bring about this fuller understanding (Eph. 3:1-10), this completeness of the revelation of the mystery of Christ.

1:3—“concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh,”

Having spoken of the gospel, Paul now turns to make some statements about its central figure, Jesus Christ. He calls Jesus here a descendant of David. This is important because the prophecies of the Old Testament are very definitive about this, that the Messiah was to be a descendant of David. Clearly, Joseph, who was from the lineage of David (Matt. 1:1-17, Luke 2:4). Now we believe that Jesus was conceived miraculously apart from Joseph (Luke 1:34-35; Matt. 1:18-25). But Joseph was the one who occupied that role of earthly father. It appears that Mary was likely a descendant of David as well. The genealogy given by Luke (Luke 3:23-38), name Joseph as a son of Eli, whereas Matthew names him as a son of Jacob. We suspect that Eli was Joseph’s father-in-law, Mary’s father. If that is true then both Mary and Joseph were descendants of David. The two family trees separated after David. Joseph came through David’s son Solomon, Mary through David’s son Nathan (2 Sam. 5:14). Both Solomon and Nathan were born to David by Bathsheba (1 Chron 3:5). Jesus being a descendant of David seems to be clear by all accounts.

1:4—“Who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord,”

There was a critical point in the ministry of Jesus when the Jews demanded a sign from Him. He had made some important claims. The significance of His words and deed was not lost to them. They asked him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” His reply on that occasion was that when they destroyed Him, He would be raised on the third day (John 2:18-22; Matt. 12:38-40). The resurrection out from among the dead was a sign from God that affirmed Christ’s identity as the Son of God, the one and only God/man. The power displayed by that event attested to the fact that this was a different life. The differences did not consist of subtleties, as among the rest of humanity. They were substantive, organic, and distinct. The resurrection identified Jesus as the one the Holy Spirit had spoken of through the prophets (Is. 10:33-11:10), had caused to be conceived in the womb of Mary (Luke 1:34-35), and had empowered for ministry on earth (Luke 4:14-21). It was the unmistakable sign that He was the “anointed one,” the Christ, the master of God’s creation. It also affirmed His sinlessness and the effectiveness of His sacrifice. The sins of the world were placed upon Him and He died for them. They were forgiven, and since He had no sins of His own, it was only just that He come to life again, and so He did. The resurrection is a testimony to His function in the redemptive plan.

1:5—“through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for his name’s sake,”

Before Paul cites his authority that he had received from Christ, he cites the fact that he had been a recipient of grace. This was a dramatic reality to Paul, this wonder of his own salvation, the wonder of the favor of continued impartation of all things divine into his being without merit on his part. Paul’s view of life was that it was to be shaped by grace, this continued standing with God whereby His favors flow moment by moment into our beings and into our world. Paul had received this life through Christ and through Christ he had received authority for a special mission.

Paul defines this mission in this way, to bring about among non-Jewish people groups what he calls “the obedience of faith.” Paul was not interested in a legalistic type of obedience that resulted in arrogance. He was interested in producing obedience that comes through faith, through being united in one’s spirit with the Spirit of God. It is an obedience that comes out of one’s heart as an act of worship. It is not aimed at achieving merit but at expressing loyalty and gratitude. It is the kind of obedience that Jesus spoke of when asked what one must do to do the works of God (John 6:29).

Paul’s letters are directed at producing this kind of obedience. His words in places are quite directive, and he makes very frequent use of the imperative. He clearly expects obedience, and yet does not assume that it will happen apart from clarification and instruction. So he is not suggesting that if one has faith, obedience is automatically produced in them by the Holy Spirit without effort on their part.

This is a critical matter in terms of ministry. Does obedience happen apart from our receiving information? Does it happen innately due to the presence of the Holy Spirit? Is there the need for the mind to acquire understanding of truth so that the Spirit can then have grounds upon which to

convict and lead? We know that some level of truth has been placed in the conscience of man, a fact that Paul will refer to later in this letter (Rom 2:14-16). But this is likely basic moral guidelines such as not murdering and not stealing, laws that seem to be present in godless cultures. The Spirit was given to guide us into all truth (John 16:13). Because of His presence we don't need teachers in the sense that the world does (1 Jn. 2:27). However, we still must need teaching and teachers since God imparts the gift of teaching (Rom. 12:6-8; Eph. 4:11). By Paul's command leaders are commanded to teach so that people live properly (1 Tim. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 4:1-5), and individual are said to need to be taught (1 Peter 2:1-3; Heb. 5:11-14; Titus 1:5-9, 3:14). So there is a process energized by the Holy Spirit that proliferates understanding of truth and it clearly involves human agents. These must be sought out and listened to and the result is increased faith and trust in the truth which faith then produces obedience.

This was the mission Paul was called to, to stimulate faith in a way that would stimulate obedience in non-Jewish people groups. We know from Paul's writings that he wanted to perpetuate a particular faith, consisting of a specific body of information (Col 2:7-8; 1 Tim 4:6, 11-12). This in turn would produce a certain lifestyle. He was not interest just in faith, but in THE faith.

All of this was for "His names sake." This is the grand purpose, the final end to which all that God orchestrates is pointed. Paul was committed to bring to Him the glory and reverence that He deserves (Is. 45:5-7, 20-25; Eph 3:10; 1 Cor. 15:28).

1:6—"among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;" Paul's calling to bring about in non-Jewish people groups the obedience produced by faith leads him to his interest in Rome and Romans. They are among those to whom he feels he has been directed. They live in the capital city of the empire that exercised control over much of the known world. From both the perspective of his own call and from a strategic standpoint, with both the present and future in mind, investment in the people of Rome was a must for Paul.

1:7—"to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints; grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul speaks of Roman Christians in two ways here. First, they are beloved of God. It is not that the rest of Rome was not loved by God. It is that those who respond to God's truth as they had, become special objects of God's affection and care. They demonstrate to others the depth of His love. Second, Paul calls them saints. Verse 6 stated that they were called by Jesus Christ. This verse states what they were called to and where Jesus was leading them. They were called to be holy ones or set apart ones, that is the meaning of the word. This is Christ's objective in what He does in our lives. There is great diversity in our personalities, our circumstances, and in most everything about our current existence. But there is something common to us all. It is that we are designated by God as His, to be joined to His very being and so to each other. That is what it is to be a "saint." From the human standpoint, being a saint has come to refer to one who has achieved a certain level of character. There is no doubt that this is the end toward which God is

working in a “holy one’s” life. But they are saints in God’s eyes the moment they believe. The word implies both distinctness and a designated use or purpose. It captures the fact that those who embrace the truth of the gospel are joined to God by the Holy Spirit to be the visible representative of Him in the world.

Paul then extends to them a greeting/blessing from the Lord. Grace and peace from God are the ultimate things we could wish, hope, and pray for. If we have His favor to enable us and His peace to assure us, we have what we need for any circumstance. It is a great greeting because it is a great reminder of who we are, who we are in the very moment facing us, and therefore who we can be. It re-directs us from merely reacting and being shaped by life to being shaped by His resources.

1:8—“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.”

Before Paul addressed the Romans with any specific message, he wanted to express his personal interest in them. As in any earthly kingdom, what happens in its chief city spreads through its realm. As went Rome, so went the Roman Empire. Paul observes that news about the Church in Rome was spreading and that meant news about Jesus was spreading. This was happening in spite of the fact that Paul, the chief messenger to the Gentiles, had never set foot in Rome. Paul was grateful for this “assist” that God’s grace and the believer’s faithfulness had provided. It was strategic. And so he begins to describe here the blessing they have been so that though he has not met many of them, he is thankful for them. We think that this letter was written about 56 AD. That means that in roughly two decades since the time of Christ there were believers in him in the capital city of the empire that had facilitated His shameful death. The very ones who had asked if He was a king, who had nailed Him and that sarcastic inscription to a cross, were seeing His power reach their doorstep. This all occurred in an age when news traveled chiefly by word of mouth. This may have come about through the expulsion of Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2), and then their apparent return subsequently. The church likely had many Jews in it, who knew other Jews. Among them thanking God would be normal and would be something commonly expressed. To this normal idea Paul adds the phrase “through Jesus Christ.” It transforms a Jewish statement into a Christian one, and in its words witness is born to all the truths that center on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

1:9—“For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the *preaching of the* gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you,”

The Spirit’s work in and through Paul was such that he developed strategies and worked them to the benefit and progress of the kingdom of God. That came very naturally for Paul. Because he thought strategically he prayed strategically and in praying strategically he naturally prayed for the progress of the Church in Rome.

Paul reveals something about himself here that is significant and it was very evident to any who followed him around. Paul served God in his spirit. That is what needs to be true of the body of Christ. Our service to Christ should flow from within, not from some expectation that we sense from others. Whenever it is sourced in our spirits from His Spirit there is through our efforts progress for the gospel. Now all believers have that Spirit residing in their own spirit. But the key is to quickly listen for and respond to His leadings and to learn to submit the things that arise from our own thoughts to those things that are of Him. He is always introducing into our minds thoughts that are His heart in the moment before you. This process described Paul's life. It should be the passion and dream of every Christian to live in that way.

1:10—"always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you."

Paul's prayer had been persistent. He asked God to allow him to travel to Rome and was determined on his part that this would come about (Acts 19:21). It would. But it would not come as Paul envisioned it. He hoped to come to them (Romans 15:32), and find refreshing rest in their company before pushing on to Spain (Romans 15:28). Very often the burdens placed on our hearts by the Holy Spirit evolve into something quite different as we pursue them. We must anticipate this and not waiver in our faith as the reality of God's plan unfolds.

1:11—"For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established;"

The goal of Paul's conversations and efforts was always that faith be strengthened. His desire to see them was not merely social. It was that he knew through his ministry to them their faith could be made more stable. The phrase that draws attention in this verse is "that I may impart some spiritual gift to you." We know that God gives the gifts sovereignly as He wills by His grace. So it is not that Paul was the source of the gifts. By using this expression he may have meant that by exercising his own gifts he would be imparting to them something of value. We know that this would be a legitimate way of viewing a gift. God gives it to a person and as they exercise it in the Church they themselves become a gift to the Church. By saying this Paul could also be referring to the practice of his apostolic authority whereby some gifts would be bestowed supernaturally on various ones of them as he laid hands on them. Elsewhere he says that Timothy's gift came to him as a result of a prophetic utterance and the laying on of hands (1 Timothy 4:14). It appears in that case that it was the Elders who laid on hands. It does not appear that apostolic authority was required, or that even Elder authority, since this is never mentioned in the texts that deal specifically with the gifts. Gifts did become energized through such occasions, but those occasions do not appear to be required for others to receive gifts of the Spirit. This is likely an example of words that are descriptive not prescriptive. But they express a desire that is prescriptive. We should have Paul's passion to strengthen and establish the faith of others and that should be paramount in our times with them. The word rendered *στηριχθῆναι*. It means not just to encourage, as that is a work that may need to be done again. This word implies becoming fixed as opposed to moving about or being detached. The concept is likely to provide

foundation and stabilizing structure. It is the word used by Christ when He tells Peter to “strengthen your brethren.” It is a primary component of ministry.

1:12—“that is, that I may be encouraged together with you *while* among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine.”

Here Paul makes it clear that the benefit produced by spending time in Rome will be mutual. There is always this process going on in the body of Christ. Even those who are key leaders learn and grow from the process we call fellowship. The sharing of one’s gift ministers to both the giver and the recipient. This is an important principle of Church ministry, that in blessing others, I am blest. In encouraging others and building them up, I am built up. It is this that keeps leaders from drying up and withering, but they must remember it and receive it both from the Lord and others. Paul makes two statements within this verse to reinforce this idea. First, he speaks of being ‘encouraged together with you,’ and then adds to that the words “among you.” Second he says they will each be strengthened by the other’s faith, and then adds to that phrase “both yours and mine.” The idea then of mutual edification and growth is championed by this wording.

1:13—“And I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented thus far) in order that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles.”

Rome eluded Paul. He speaks here of planning to come often, yet not having succeeded thus far. We know that this did happen to Paul on different occasions. We suspect that by personality he made plans and set goals and so raised expectations. There is a huge upside to this, but the downside is that our plans can have to be altered because of the more urgent leading of the Spirit and then we have to deal with the unmet expectations we have raised and the inevitable criticism. Paul was no stranger to this dilemma (2 Cor. 1:12-18; Acts 16:6-10). There is a spontaneity factor inherent in the Spirit-directed life that we must factor in. It does not appear that this can or should be avoided (see previous verses as well as James 4:13-17). The balance of establishing a plan and then being willing to abandon it seems critical.

Paul planned to visit Rome because of the possibility he saw of bearing fruit among them. This was his passion, to strengthen Gentile churches. He longed to invest in Rome. He knew it was both strategic and needy. It is always the desire of the one whose heart is right to bear fruit for God. They long for opportunity to do so and they seek opportunity that aligns with their giftedness. Paul dreamed of Rome and the way in which his prayer to visit there would materialize would stretch him considerably. God does not remove the “stretch factor” that comes with our dreaming great things.

1:14—“I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to the foolish.”

When Paul says he is under obligation he uses a banking term so that he is saying that he is a debtor to the people he names. Now in what sense did Paul owe the Greeks and Barbarians, the wise and the foolish anything? How could it even be construed that as Christ's apostle he representatively owed them anything? Only love can explain this expression. Only God's own character, that which is within Him, demands anything of Him or constrains Him to behave towards someone in a certain way. So Paul is a debtor because of the love within him that constrained him (2 Cor. 5:14-21). It was who he had become in Christ that placed a demand on his behavior. This demand of love from within was so great that it was not mitigated by the "status" and relative social rank of people. It had made Paul blind to all such distinctions. He looked and saw great value and worth in them and that was it. This reveals the remarkable transformation that had occurred in the Hebrew of Hebrews, the onetime Pharisee.

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1:15—"Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome."

Because of the love of God that had filled Paul's heart and so constrained his to minister the truth to all men, he eagerly anticipated those in Rome. He wanted them to know his own vision and passion for that trip. He was driven to do it by who he himself had become in Christ. The gospel has been mentioned two times already in this letter. Paul understood it as the body of truth for which he was set apart (vs. 1), and also as a work for which he was set apart (vs. 5). It must be understood as both. It is truth, it is truth that advocates a certain way of life, and it is a truthful way of life that must be propagated, to which men everywhere are called. They are called to learn it, to follow it, and to teach it. The rest of Paul's letter will be concerned with this, the clear definition of the facts under-girding the gospel and their implications.

1:16—"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

There are two key words in this verse, a verse that again expresses something about the theme of this letter, the gospel. Those key words are the word gospel and the word salvation.

The word gospel has both a narrow and a broad meaning. The word itself comes from the word for good, joined to the word for an announcement. So the word semantic value is "good news." It is used in the narrower sense to speak of the central facts regarding the person central to the good news, Jesus Christ. It refers in this way to the news about His death, His burial, and His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-8). The term gospel can also be used in the broader sense of the body of knowledge that is true because of these core essential facts, even reaching back to times before the life and death of Christ (Gal. 3:8; Heb. 4:2). This broader idea is what the theme of Romans is. Paul will speak to the entire scope of what could be called "the gospel experience," the thinking and lifestyle that are true because of the core truths of Christ.

The term salvation is also one with a narrow and broad meaning. This word means to rescue or to make safe, healthy, or sound. We use the term today most often to speak of the moment of

belief, when one receives forgiveness from the penalty of sin and is pardoned by God. It is used very sparingly in this way in Scripture, to speak of our justification. It is used in several different ways. At times it is used to speak of the process initiated by our pardon and forgiveness, the process of our sanctification in the practical world of real life (Phil. 2:12; 2 Tim. 3:15; 2 Cor. 1:6). At other times it is used of our future glorification, when that process will be completed in the sense of our being transformed into perfect beings (1 Peter 1:5). It is often used of being rescued from calamity (Lk. 1:71; Phil. 1:19), or even sickness (James 5:15). It is used for being in a state of physical soundness (Acts 27:34), what we would call good health.

As stated earlier, in the world of American evangelicalism, the words “salvation” and “saved” refer most often to that moment in time when we pray the “sinner’s prayer” and receive forgiveness for our sins. It is important and critical in terms of building an accurate doctrine of salvation that we not impose this more narrow meaning on the texts of Scripture that use the various derivatives of the Greek word σωζω. That word has a broader meaning than our twenty first century American evangelical usage.

Paul says here that the gospel of God, meaning the truth that encompasses the facts of Christ’s life and death with all its implications, is the power of God. By this Paul means that this truth has a vested ability and potential to accomplish work. That is what power is. Then he names the specific work it accomplishes, which is the salvation of everyone that believes. By salvation he means not only their forgiveness but their transformation from disobedient sinners into obedient children of God who reflect the character of God Himself. He also means their eventual transformation bodily into beings who are flawless, completely rescued from all the effects of sin, beings that physically display His glory.

The gospel should not be seen as simply the source of our forgiveness. It is the source of our transformation as well. The gospel does not have this power and ability independent of God. The gospel is simply an announcement of His action. This action, taken by God, motivated by His character, brings about the satisfaction of all God’s requirements to restore humanity from their fallen state to a state of spiritual health and sound standing with God. We have only to believe in the report of that Divine action, the gospel. So the gospel is an announcement of action taken by God that results in the salvation of all who come to believe the gospel’s report of the action.

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1:17—“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘but the righteous man shall live by faith.’”

The Greek word γαρ, rendered “for,” signals that this verse provides further explanation which strengthens the statement just made. That statement was that the gospel was a display of God’s power in the lives of those who believed it. This verse then, explains in what sense that is true and can be observed. Through the gospel, a righteousness produced by God is being revealed.

This righteousness is not a human righteousness that reveals itself through mere outward acts of conformity to some code. It is unique, sourced not in man but in God. So this righteousness is the sort that pleases Him and conforms to His high standard because it is actually from Him.

This righteousness is being revealed, coming to light for all to see. It is an ongoing revelation. It is not over and done with. It is not an event recorded in history that we read about and reflect on. We not only observe this act of revelation, we participate in it. Paul says it is being revealed from faith. Faith is its noticeable, observable manifestation. That means that the revelation of God's righteousness is occurring through the lives of humanity, specifically through the lives of all who believe the gospel. Wherever there is faith in the gospel, it is certain that His power is the cause.

Faith in humanity can only be explained as the result of God's work. It would not be there by our own effort and imagination. This God is too different to be a product of our own imagination. The world is full of gods of our own imagination, and they are nothing like this one true God. So faith among humanity in God, is clear evidence that He exists, for its presence can only be explained by His power.

The result of this display of God's righteousness is that more faith is produced. This is the idea rendered by the Greek phrase *ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστει*, rendered in English "from faith to faith." The righteous produced by God shows itself in faith, faith that increases in individuals and spreads among individuals. It is becoming visible in diverse places, from the monastery to the marketplace.

Faith then, can be seen as very critical to God. It is what His efforts among humanity are aimed at, what His power is focused on producing in us. What our journey is about is increasing ability to trust Him and so to be empowered by Him and used by Him to produce greater faith in others. Faith is the means and end of His work in humanity.

All of this conforms to the statement God made through the prophet Habakkuk (Hab. 2:4), which Paul quotes. This statement is quoted by Paul here and in his letter to the Galatians (3:11). It is also quoted by the writer to the Hebrews (10:38). In the Habakkuk passage the righteous person who lives by faith is being contrasted with the proud one, particularly those of Chaldea. The New Testament writer's various quotations of that verse are "free quotations." That is, they seek to extract and state its principle rather than its exact words. The faith principle cannot be overstated. It is a critical one in terms of understanding divine value and thought. Faith is what God seeks to produce, what He seeks out in hearts, and what He rewards. He does so without regard for other qualities that we would view as more meritorious. A person is considered righteous by God purely on the basis of faith. It causes Him to forgive all other liabilities. He extends to them all that is His. So a person of faith finds life, God's life, eternal life, all that was lost in the Garden of Eden. So a person is declared righteous by their faith, and they become more righteous by virtue of their growing faith. This statement's truth is being clearly demonstrated, "the righteous will live by his faith."

This faith life is the righteousness that is being unveiled by God through the gospel. The gospel provides the entry level message that begins the faith-life. It also provides the truth that leads to

more truth that leads to more of the life. This revelation is occurring because something else is also being revealed.

1:18—“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”

It is good that a righteousness is being produced by God in this world. This is good because the fact that He is Himself righteous means that He is angry with the unrighteousness of men, and that this righteous and just anger is being made known among men. The fact that it is being revealed does not mean it is being fully experienced. But what the verses that follow will show is that it is being experienced in that just consequences are being meted out by God that men are experiencing for their disobedience of truth. The condition that will be described is one that exists in every human being apart from the grace of God and truth of the gospel. Their condition leads humanity on a journey in which they repeat Adam’s sin many times each day. Morally speaking, all manner of depravity is possible in every person. More sobering, it is likely. This is what makes the gospel urgent and it is why it is called good news. God always moves against unrighteousness.

The next 15 verses will speak of things we see in the world each day that are shameful and destructive. They are consequences to sin that humankind experiences. They are part of humanity’s experience when he violates God because they’re embedded in the fabric of creation due to the character of the Creator and Sustainer of all that is. Because God is imminent in His creation, that is, He is at work in it and is linked to it, it reflects who He is. The result is that it tends to spew out that which violates His character. So the life of sin is a hard life.

In this verse the reality of humanity’s stance toward God is very pointedly stated. The human condition is not one of ignorance, but one of deliberate choice. The truth is known, but it is suppressed in unrighteousness. This means that humanity chooses to overwhelm the voice of truth by the force of their own will because they desire those things that are unrighteous. The result is that truth’s voice is ‘pushed down’ in them in favor of things that they would rather experience and do. This violates the will of their creator and the laws of creation and it means the loss of the life humanity was intended to have.

None of this is to say that men know the gospel and that they have all rejected it. It is to say that they know there is a Creator and that He is to be acknowledged and served. Humanity is created a worshipping being. They instinctively think of first causes. They do not know Christ instinctively, and they are not good instinctively. But as part of creation they are instinctively drawn by creation to ponder a Creator. In that pondering they make a series of moral choices, for no one can process such ideas without entering the moral realm. The truth of a Creator and Sustainer is one with great implications. To the degree one suppresses that truth, they experience the wrath of their Creator, and are punished by their own choices. To the degree one accepts that truth and grows in it, they discover who He is and the life He Himself gives. This section of Scripture is about the former, the life that is experienced apart from the Creator.

1:19—“Because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.”

This verse speaks to the issue of why the wrath of God is being revealed. It is a valid question to ask, “Why would a righteous and loving God be angry to the degree that He would allow human suffering?” it is a question that should be asked because reflecting on it helps bring to light a whole string of the Creator’s attributes.

Here we learn that God is not angry with men because of what they don’t know. That would be an injustice. He is angry because of their conscious response to truth that is evident within them. It is what they do with what He knows they clearly know. He is also angry because of what they do with what is evident to them. The next verse will show that He is not referring here to specific information that leads to salvation, only to general information about God that men can clearly see and do clearly see. The subject of this verse is not what is known, but the fact that something is known about God to men, and we conclude that this refers to all of humankind. Whatever it is, and the next verse will speak to that, it involves things that God has made evident or clear TO humanity.

This is also information which is clear WITHIN them. This does not mean they have concluded it is true. They have in fact done the opposite. But it does mean they have been able to consider it to the point of seeing its truth. They have then had opportunity to decide whether or not to accept it as true, and this is where they have stumbled and fallen. They have pondered the truth and its implications and chosen to extinguish the testimony of their own conscience within them in favor of being able to believe what they wish and so be able to act as they please. This is what suppressing the truth refers to. It is the conscious act of replacing truth with fiction in order to gain some selfish end. It is this activity among humankind that has brought to light God’s anger. We see that side of God in response to this selfish, reckless behavior in humanity. A being of lesser character might overlook it. God sees its destructive power.

The anger of God is different than that which is generally seen in humanity. Our anger is usually personal hurt. It comes when we perceive that we are being de-valued or when our desires are being blocked. It is most often self-centered in the sense that it is an impulsive course of action aimed at meeting our own need and getting what our damaged, scared psyche tells us is right. God’s anger is different in that it is not impulsive and it is based on desires that are right and just and in motives that are pure. It is a course of action rooted in perfect character rather than in a damaged and scared psyche. It is motivated by true and complete knowledge of motive and thought not by mere perception. It becomes a reality only when love has done its work, and so only after warnings have been given, multiple opportunities granted, grace periods extended, all the things we would hope to do, done to absolute perfection. When we study God’s wrath this is what is revealed about it. It is fierce, but it is also just and very, very slow in coming. The wrath of God is a reality and it is being revealed. He is revealing it in hope that humanity will be drawn to repentance before the fullness of His wrath is shown and confirms them forever in their fallen state.

1:20—“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”

Psalm 19:1 tells us that “the heavens are telling of the glory of God.” Here in his letter Paul makes the same kind of statement about creation. Creation is what theologians call general revelation. By this term we mean that creation reveals general information about the Creator, just as anything that has been made is an expression of the one who made it. We call it general revelation because the information specific to salvation is not evident in creation.

But Paul says here that information about God’s existence, His character and makeup is “clearly seen” through what He has created. Because of the complexities of creation, both in terms of its volume and its intricacies, many things about God are repeatedly demonstrated so that great clarity is provided for the simplest and the greatest minds alike. So vast is this information that the Psalmist says that creation “pours forth speech” (Psalm 19:2).

Paul says here that men are without excuse. The world we live in reveals that there is a God and it reveals what He is like, as long as we do not suppress the message or warp it to fit what we want the truth to be. If it is viewed as the creation of someone, it reveals much about that someone. To those who deny it is a creation of a personal being, its truth is lost. To those who imagine a being and work creation’s message to fit it, the message is marred by their own ideas. To those who let it speak, it clearly reveals God’s eternal power and His divine nature. That He has power to create such enduring power as the forces in the universe reveals that His power is eternal. That so much about creation is predictable and consistent, reveals His immutability and stability. That there is a spot in creation called earth that sustains our lives reveals His love, concern, and goodness. Creation’s beauty reveals His beauty. Its order reveals His knowledge and His faithfulness. Its detail reveals His immanence. Its vastness reveals His transcendence. So there is no person that can claim not to have the information they needed to believe in God. The testimony of Scripture is that this truth is made available to all. If they are good stewards of this truth, more specific revelation is brought to them by God. Thus they can eventually come to know the truth about Jesus Christ that leads to salvation, if they continue to open their hearts to what truth they have been given. This principle, that God reveal Himself in stages and brings greater understanding of truth to those who respond rightly to what they know is stated in a variety of contexts in Scripture (Luke 8:10, 18; Jn. 7:17, 12:36-43). And so the idea that people exist who have had no opportunity to respond to the gospel while true, does not mean that information has been withheld from them. In the sense of their ears actually hearing the truth that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again, it is true that many have never heard. However, it seems from the overall testimony of Scripture that this is because of rejection of more general information on God. We must not be arrogant in this matter, but it seems that in His sovereignty and love God will move heaven and earth to bring an adequate knowledge of truth to those whom His omnipresence and omniscience tell Him will respond (Jonah 1-4; Acts 10; Acts 16:6-10).

1:21—“For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.”

This verse describes the overall action of humanity with regard to God. It is, due to God’s grace not a statement about each individual. It does describe the trend that has been present in each person. When Paul says they knew God, he is speaking in terms of the knowledge that comes with general revelation. The word he uses for know here is γινωσκω, and it describes a knowledge that is personal, even intimate. So through creation there is a proper sense in every human that there is a powerful creator. But Paul goes on to say that they do not respond to this series of thoughts that are present within them by honoring their creator. They do not acknowledge His goodness to them by giving thanks. Paul does not at this point say why there is this absence of logical reaction. We can surmise from what follows and from other biblical revelation that it is due to humanity’s aversion to be ruled by anyone other than themselves. There is an aversion to submission. It is more expedient to invent a god or gods that allow us to think as we naturally think and pursue those things we naturally like to pursue. These are the “futile speculations” Paul refers to. They are futile because they are not truthful. What is not truthful enslaves us and so wastes our efforts and our years. What is futile is an illusion that in time we must face, and that is the nature of the theology we invent and erect that allows us to behave as we please.

But there is something else such thinking does that goes beyond futile into the realm of tragedy. Paul describes it as the darkening of the heart. We know that light and darkness in Scripture refer to the presence or absence of truth. To have one’s heart darkened is to experience loss of truth. So the truth once instinctively pondered of creation and a creator is eventually lost. Such individuals with darkened minds cannot go back to it and find their right way. It is forever gone, and that is the greatest tragedy that can happen to any human being. They would not believe therefore they could not believe (John 13:39). The thoughts of hope and trust in a benevolent creator are replaced by speculations and superstitions and apart from the miraculous work of God’s grace, the comfort and wisdom of the light of truth has been forever lost. It no longer resides within them, but has been chased out by unbelief. They have come to believe their own lie, and that is called here the darkening of the heart.

1:22—“Professing to be wise, they became fools,”

Such as have darkened hearts become truth searchers, but not truth finders. Those who respond to what truth they know, however elementary, are those who are entrusted with more truth from God. So these profess to be wise and are impressive from a human standpoint. They are quite often lettered and of keen intellect. But they are fools because they cannot set aside the natural bias humanity has against the idea of a God.

Whenever we go against the truth we become fools. We cannot change truth by not believing it. It is the ultimate futility to think that truth can be altered. Yet there is always an air of wisdom about those who stand against truth. There is a certain appeal to humanity in their swagger, their independence, and their “freedom.” So such a course can appear to be wise, courageous and

attractive. It is pursued in the name of things like wisdom, enlightenment, reality, open-mindedness, free thought, all of which have come to sound more noble to humanity than things like faith, trust, and submission. But the reality is stated here in seven words. In the name of wisdom, humanity becomes foolish. It is a great irony that we are able to become foolish while all the time embracing wisdom.

1:23—“and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.”

Somehow in the mainstream of humanity it has become easier to ascribe creation to beings that are figments of our own imaginations rather than accepting the testimony of revelation about an all-wise, all-knowing creator. The truth is that the glory of an incorruptible God is a profound treasure. It not only explains the existence of all things, but it explains the purpose of all things, and gives them value and significance. A God who is eternal and unchanging, who is not subject to any influence outside that of His own character, lends a dignity and value to all that is.

The fact that such a concept is so easily let go of argues strongly for the existence of a powerful rival who has considerable ability to deceive and to twist man's perception of reality. The result is that man is willing to blot from his mind the One who gives him eternal hope and dignity, this eternal, all powerful, holy being. In His place he imagines beings to whom he ascribes power against all logic, beings who like fallen man are subject to all manner of whim and diverse influence. The truth reveals an actual person, a personal being. Humanity exchanges this for an image, an idea represented by an image in various forms. In the exchange they let go of all that makes humanity distinct from the rest of creation, the glory of man who is made in the image of God. There is nothing that has degraded humanity more than unbelief.

1:24—“Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.”

Sin in humanity is such that it gradually spoils and eventually destroys any and all moral fiber that a man has. God's grace is the only thing that can arrest and reverse this process. It is all that keeps within the human race any standard of morality. God is not the author of this destruction. Rather it is He that keeps it from running its course. He is the reason why there is good in the world and why humanity rises to do good things. He only needs to withhold his grace and people will quickly spiral downward when left to their own thoughts and devices.

This verse describes a partial withdrawal of God's grace. Whenever individuals repeatedly chose to reject the truth of God's existence, He allows them to experience a little more of life without His grace. The result is always that they move a little further away from the dignity He gave them in creation. This verse teaches that God lets go of convicting them on the inside regarding moral purity. Since lust is often the reason why they wish to be free of Him, He allows them to serve their lusts. The result is that which brings them dishonor. It is most often a secret life that eventually comes to light and brings them shame and loss, but not necessarily unhappiness.

There is a blindness that settles in with this condition so that they are often content and sometimes proud of their lack of restraint. Whatever their own evaluation may be, the truth is that setting aside the truth of God always brings shame and dishonor to a person. Humanity was made in the image of God, meant to reflect His glory and so to have a special dignity. They are meant to live by reason and truth, guided by a moral conscience, rather than living by mere instinct. When truth is set aside, God withdraws to some degree His grace, and the result is always a pattern of choices that degrade the person when they become known.

1:25—“For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever, Amen.”

This verse adds further thought to what has just been stated. Paul has spoken of the withdrawal of God’s grace. God, at the behest of willful man, lets go of them and allows them to pursue the way they please. Though it is not a total withdrawal of grace, without which not a soul would be preserved, it has far-reaching impact. Such individuals bring shame and dishonor on themselves. This phrase states why this “giving over” is justified by God. Such people have acted deliberately and have made a very willful choice. They have willingly embraced a false theology and let go of a truthful one. The heart of the matter is that they have elevated to a position of supreme authority created things, from God’s created things to ideas of their own creation. Either way, by deliberate choice, something or someone occupies the exclusive place that only God deserves. They experience the consequences of living under that rule.

There is tragic irony recorded in these words. Humanity, a special creation of God meant to rule over the rest of creation (Gen 1:23), instead serves created things. There is a sad loss of dignity that comes with their willfulness, a loss of freedom, a distorting of the design of the Creator, and this is part of a groaning that Paul hears in creation (Rom. 8:19-22).

1:26—“For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural.”

This is the second of three times in verses 18 through 32 that a “giving over” is spoken of (see verse 24 and 28). As individuals progressively move away from truth there is a progressive withdrawal of grace and truth. The first “giving over” happened when they refused to honor God as creator and be thankful to Him (verse 21). The result is not named precisely, only that their bodies were “dishonored among them.” This likely refers to a general promiscuity and loss/setting aside of sexual boundaries.

Because of their growing willfulness in this course of action whereby they set up for themselves false gods to serve and false theologies, God gives them over to what He calls “degrading passions.” These are specifically described as same-sex affairs. This verse speaks of the presence of this lifestyle among women. The following verse will address its presence among men. Here it is called degrading and unnatural. From these terms God’s view of the lifestyle is very clear. It is sin. In terms of design homosexuality is to Him, the designer, unnatural. That means that in the

end it will not serve well. When we go against design, we are always settling for less than what the designer has for us, and this is true of any and all sin. This is ultimately why it is “degrading.” It takes away from God’s intentions and His plan.

Sin in general is degrading. But it seems that people are compromised as persons through sexual sin. This is one of several reasons why Paul would say in another letter that the one who commits immorality sins against his own body (1 Cor. 6:18). In some sense the impact of sexual sin is such that it is experienced in our very beings. That consent may be given so that there is no victim is meaningless. We are ourselves are victimized by it. And so it is not just a matter of it degrading us because people look down on us. We would not be made better if society simply would accept our actions. Sexual immorality actually robs us of something.

1:27—“and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.”

Paul repeats his line of reasoning that he has made regarding women in verse 26, by stating that men have done the same thing. When men abandon the truth of God they cast aside in time all of its boundaries, and this manifest itself in the expression of sexuality. It does not mean that everyman who does so becomes homosexual in orientation. Homosexuality is just one demonstration of humanity leaving the boundaries of sexual expression that God has set forth. Other examples would be pedophilia and bestiality, or some of the pornographic addictions of the modern era. Paul’s point is that abandoning God ultimately shows itself in the area of sexual expression.

It is important that we remember that our sexuality was part of God’s design in us so that it is not evil. It is in fact, good. Like many of the features of our design, it can become evil if not governed by the truth. That is always the issue when it comes to living in a fallen world. When we leave the safety of truth something within us dies a little more. Just a little more of God’s image in us is tarnished and we experience the “due penalty” of our error. The penalty manifests itself in spiritual, emotional and physical symptoms. The point of this pair of verses is that deviant sexual behavior is an ominous sign. Seeking freedom individuals have turned away from truth and in that act they always become enslaved.

1:28—“And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things that are not proper.”

Since men wish to live without God, He allows them to experience such a life. Paul writes that He gives them over to a depraved mind. A depraved mind is different from a deprived mind. A deprived mind is the result of not being allowed access to certain facts and truths. It may be to some degree a product of one’s own actions, but it also is the result of other things outside of one’s own control. Knowledge has been withheld. A depraved mind is one that has chosen a moral direction, to disregard and set aside truth’s standards of right and wrong and substitute

one's own. It is a mind that increasingly sets its own moral and ethical standards. It is the kind of mind that produces the atrocities of Stalin and Hitler. But it is also the kind of mind that produces the apathy that tolerates injustice and abuse. Because it is not a mind that is properly submitted to truth, it cannot be one that guides in ways that are truthful. Because it is not submitted to a higher standard of morality, it sinks to the level of expedience, and a mind operating on the principle of expediency will soon dictate unprincipled and improper behavior. It is a blessing to have a mind governed and shackled by the truth. It keeps one free. It is the displeasure and judgment of God that leads to a mind that knows no moral boundaries, produces no pangs of conscience and yields no anguish over personal behavior. That is a mind from which God has withdrawn a portion of His influence. Just as such a person has chosen first to not acknowledge God, God has chosen not to acknowledge them. Their choice has brought on them moral consequences that reach far beyond theology.

1:29—"being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,"

This verse makes two distinctive descriptive statements, then introduces a third which is continued in the verses that follow. The first descriptive statement is a verbal idea expressed by a verbal adjective in the perfect tense. It describes action that has gone on that results in a certain state. It is rendered in the NASB by the phrase "being filled." The idea is likely that this is the moral direction they have allowed themselves to travel, resulting in these things being in full bloom in their character. The second descriptive idea is introduced by an adjective, rendered in the NASB "full of." This introduces five examples of thoughts/actions that have come about as a result of the character defects that are in full bloom. These five terms, all in the genitive case describe particular things that can be seen in individuals who suppress the truth. Those who are filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, and evil, are found to be full of these specific things; envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice. The third descriptive phrase is introduced by the last word in this verse and it extends through verse 31. This phrase is a string of nouns and adjectives in the accusative case. They could be viewed as the NASB rendering conveys, as delineating a state of being. These describe what they have become because of who they are. When we suppress truth, it eventually shapes who we are and the results are destructive to all that is good in us. So in this verse we have what they have chosen to be filled with instead of being filled with the truth and with God Himself. Then we see what they are full of, courses of action that come with such compromise. Then we see a string of realities that describe what they are, the identity that is theirs.

1:30—"slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,"

When people suppress truth they eventually suppress the truth about themselves. They become what is repulsive even to them, but they are unable to see the reality of what they are. This verse is a listing of their realities, things that others would say are true of them. They are slanderers. The term used here means to talk against. They become those who speak against others. They are

haters of God. This naturally develops in one who suppresses truth. It is natural for them to react to the embodiment and source of truth. They are insolent, or one who insults others and abuses them. The unspeakable things that shock the public become more and more prevalent in those who deny the truth. They place themselves above others. The word rendered arrogant means “to stand above,” and this is what they wish to do. They are constantly placing themselves in positions where they get the spotlight. This quest naturally makes them boastful. They speak in a very inflated way of themselves and their achievements. The next term describes them as inventors of evil. This is perhaps the saddest of the things listed because it marks them out as intentional in their evil. They become sources of ways to pursue all that is vile and offensive to God. They think of new ways to pursue the same old lusts and this is a commentary on the futile lifestyle they are caught in. They are disobedient to parents. The word disobedient is *απειθεῖς*, *θειθω* meaning to persuade. With the *α* privative prefixed to it, it becomes a word that means unpersuadable. So their suppression of truth effects one of the most basic of all human relationships, and can be seen in the young as well as the more mature. It is natural that the relationship that was to allow for the propagation of holiness (Deut. 6:4-9), break down when truth is rejected.

1:31—“and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.”

There is in the conscience of all humanity a witness that certain things are wrong. There is also the understanding that such behavior deserves the worst punishment, even death. This is likely speaking of the second death, final separation from God for all eternity, though it is certain the Law revealed that some of the sins mentioned above were capital offenses. So this may be referring to knowledge gained through written revelation, though not all of humanity had this revelation.

This understanding that some crimes are punishable by death is seen across all sorts of cultural lines. It is a witness to the presence of truth within each human. This idea, that certain things are inherently wrong is eroded as humanity suppresses the truth. In time, no truth is safe. It can all be suppressed. And so in a society that begins to champion moral freedom, there comes to be laws that are against basic moral law so that they violate the conscience of those with an ear for truth. A very twisted condition of morality develops full of contradiction as a society journeys away from absolute moral standards. It isn't long before laws protecting lifestyles that break moral law are the norm. This moral reversal happens to some degree in all men regardless of the particular culture. It is the ultimate insult to God because in the act of approving behavior that God labels immoral, man has deified himself, or at the very least declared God impotent.

We must remember that such moral reversal comes as a result of God's judgment on man. Because man suppresses the truth of God's existence, doing so because he likes the idea of being his own master, God withdraws a measure of His grace. He withdraws that which restrains a person from behaving as a creature of instinct. They begin a journey down a path of moral independence. Along the way God graciously continues to call for their repentance. If they

repent, God's grace takes them on a journey that will result in their full restoration. Apart from such a journey of repentance a person moves progressively further from God and experiences the progressive withdrawal of God's grace and its counterpart, His truth. Without these, degrading passions set in and such a person loves it so. They continue to spiral away from God until they arrive at the condition described in this verse where the untrue is true, evil is somehow good, and God is only a quaint idea. They are where they are because they have been judged, let go by God.

The first chapter of Romans describes the condition of unbelieving humankind. If a man, or a group of men are different, it is due to God's grace in response to their belief. This is the scenario that was introduced when Adam and Eve fell that has played itself out in the life of every person. Humanity began to suppress the truth. As the fig leaves covered their nakedness and helped cover the truth about their condition so they pontificate on morality and invent deities to cover over the bare truth of their willfulness. Every human has a choice to make about the Creator and the truth He reveals. To a man we suppress His truth to some degree. The book of Romans shows why the gospel is such good news. It is God's power brought to bear on this hopeless condition in man.